A Child's Story of American Literature

CHAPTER II.

Boys and Girls in Gray New England.

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THE first book that was printed in America was printed in the Northern colony. Like the reports of the Southern settlers it, too, was not written for its own sake. It was the Bay Psalm Book and it was written by several ministers to use at church service. It was typical of almost the entire writing of colonial New England. Though there were some diaries and two fine histories and some descriptions of life in the new country, most of the writing there was on religious subjects. And most of this might have been written in England, so little did it reflect the life of the pioneer. The life that was going on inside of them seemed much more important than the world around them.

We cannot realize to-day how large a part in this life was filled by religion. But it was, unfortunately, a religion which was neither sunny nor peaceful. Instead, it was one of fear and endless dispute. They seemed genuinely to believe that the gloomier they were the more religious they were. As for disputing, there was nothing they would not eagerly dispute about in the whole field of belief and of behavior. They even disputed about singing in church. Though their first book was the Psalms chopped up so that they might be sung in church, you must not imagine that they paid much attention to the way they sung them. The people used to sing entirely by ear, repeating after the minister. It finally grew so bad that people with more sensitive ears began to object. Even some of the ministers, who were not only opposed to changes of any kind but particularly to those which lessened their own importance, joined in the revolt. Then arose a bitter warfare of words between the rote singers as they were called and the note singers, who wanted to have the tunes printed also. When the note singers finally triumphed the custom of singing schools began; and for many years these remained about the only amusement of the small towns. So, in every particular, the Puritan preachers tried to stop the progress of human thought and to prevent all innovations. They were so powerful that they could even have any one publicly whipped who criticized their sermons.

But few people wanted to criticize their sermons, however long they were. A young man at Harvard College, a boy we should call him now, wrote that the students had listened gladly to a prayer two hours long and were sorry it hadn't been three. Can you imagine any boy feeling that way to-day? And in those days, too, the congregation had to stand during prayers; they could only sit down to the sermon. In the winter, too, there was no fire in the meeting house. Some people thought that religion was going to pieces when a few very progressive ones, as late as 1734, began to put in the new stove which Ben Franklin had just invented and which still bears his name. But people were used to being cold in those days, for while the open fires sizzled their faces their backs were shivering. The foremost writer and minister of the entire Colonial period, Cotton Mather, tells of the ink freezing on his pen as he sat within the chimney place; and as he wrote prodigiously and seemed never to have to stop for a word, you can be sure the ink did not stand on his pen very long.

He came of a family which always had its pen in hand. His grandfather had landed in 1635 and had written all the time he wasn't preaching, and he lived long enough to have carved on his tombstone "Under this stone lies Richard Mather, who had a son greater than his father, and eke a grandson greater than either." And the middle Mather had written ninety-two books! But with the exception of another preacher, Jonathan Edwards, he was more famous at home and in Europe than any pre-Revolutionary American but Ben Franklin.

One of Mather's books tried to explain the Salem witchcraft mania in 1692, for the fires of which he and his family were largely responsible; and he himself had ridden around the scaffold on which a fellow clergyman was being executed for witchcraft and commanded the crowd not to listen to the dying words of the poor wrongly accused man. This history was full of the most preposterous stories, which seemed to him to be true, and which seem to us to be contemptibly silly to-day. But you must remember that what the New Englanders believed about witches, everybody in Europe at the time believed also. The Puritans were simply more exposed than other people to the fear of the devil and of the devil's human tools, as witches were supposed to be. For they had the misfortune to believe in a God who seemed maliciously to delight in allowing men to be betrayed into the clutches of a devil who actually walked up and down upon the earth. If you fell into his hands, why, so much the worse for you, that was all. Thus they themselves in religious matters were as fierce as the God in whom they believed. Jonathan Edwards, though in some respects a sensitive and tender-hearted man, narrated with seeming pleasure the spiritual anguish of a little four-year-old girl wrestling with God in prayer not to let her go to hell, and asserted that He held human beings over the pit much as one holds a loathsome insect over the fire.

Cotton Mather writing in the fireplace. Above—The Mather coat of arms.

The most profitable literary work of the entire Colonial period seems to have become so merely because it exactly represented what people thought and paraded a Deity as abominable as their belief demanded. Perhaps no book since has sold so well in America, for one person out of every thirty-five bought a copy of the first edition and it was many times republished. This was "The Day of Doom—A Poetical Description of the Great and Last Judgment." As you may judge from the epitaph on the tombstone of Richard, where "either" and "father" are made to rime with "Mather," the Puritans did not have a very good ear for verse, even though they were so fond of writing it; and this long poem was very bad indeed.

Hold out as they might against the modern ideas and still disputing fiercely not only with all innovators but with themselves, at last the Puritans were forced to give ground. The hold upon the government of New England by the churchmen in their black Geneva gowns and their black velvet skull caps was slowly loosened. They found themselves no longer able to dictate to the magistrates, and when Boston decided to allow a man to vote if he owned property even though he were not a church member, the old despotic rule of Puritan divines was over. The day when the meeting house and court house were one had long since passed before the town of Boston had, in 1750, completed its one hundred and twentieth year. The four generations of the great Mather family had covered the entire change.

If you had gone to school in the days of the Puritans your parents would have had to pay for your schooling. Not until the days of the Revolution were the schools entirely supported by the town taxes. In the winter you would have been chilled to the marrow as you sat bundled up in your overcoat and with your mittens on except when you were writing or figuring, and what dim light there was would have come through oiled paper window panes. If you were studying your lesson you would have to study it out loud; and if the boy next to you were studying another part of his lesson out loud, you would probably study yours out louder to keep from being disturbed by him. You would not have had a slate to do your figuring on. This and your writing would have been done on paper brought with you which you had cut from the bark of a birch tree with your jack knife. Unless you had carried it in your pocket, the ink which your mother had made for you out of ink powder would be frozen. But you would not have been allowed to make your own pen out of your own goose until you were twelve, for it was a ticklish job to carve a goose quill into a pen. If you were a very clever boy you might even enter Harvard at the age of eleven. So you see every boy at college knew how to make his own pens. But he didn't know how to write with them in as good a fashion as you write now, even though he could understand much bigger words. Boys at college learned a great deal of Latin and Greek and theology, but if we may judge from a letter John Hancock, who entered at thirteen, wrote to his sister in his senior year, there was very little attention paid to anything else. No boy could enter a college to-day knitting the colonies together was perwith so little knowledge of commas and periods as had this aristocratic young gentleman who was so soon to sign the Declaration of Independence.

Naturally, we think of our Colonial period as far away and brief. Yet as generations go, it was only five yesterdays back, and it was a quarter century longer than the years our national existence have already counted. It is because so much has happened since and our literature has now taken its place in world literature that we think of the Colonial period as short. Nor may we estimate our Puritan ancestors by the little amount of literature they produced in so long a time. They had very great intellectual energy, perhaps greater than ours, but it did not express itself in what we are most likely to call literature to-day. It expressed itself chiefly in sermons and in arguing about theology, and sometimes in putting their arguments into very stiff poetry.

But even if they had set out to write what we to-day call literature, it would not have been good. For some reason that people may guess at but cannot quite understand, there is something about the literature of a colony which keeps it poor and imitative. It seems always tied to its mother's apron strings and toddling after her. You may notice this in the case of England's two great colonies to-day, Canada and Australia. They are in every other respect advanced and independent countries, but they have not yet produced a literature of their own. Had the Puritans tried to write more imaginative and inventive books, we can be certain that they would only have imitated English fashions and novels which were already old when they reached New England. The first copy of Shakespeare even was 100 years behind time in getting to America, and it was not for thirteen years that another copy was brought over. Some people in New York and Philadelphia, when at last they tried to write books for their own sake rather than the sake of something else, succeeded only in doing very poorly what English writers they admired were doing better. The books that they wrote had nothing in them which resembled American life or American ideas or even American scenery. And if you could have found such a book anywhere it would have been in New York or Philadelphia, for neither of them was under the iron rule of a Puritan creed.

Indeed, they were comparatively free from feeling that they had to preach a sermon or make a long argument about theology every time they wrote a book. New York had been founded purely as a business enterprise by Dutch traders, and after business hours people there did not think it a sin to try to amuse themselves. And Philadelphia had begun as a city of brotherly love and not brotherly dissension. Though like New England it intended to bring about better social and religious conditions than existed elsewhere, it was very unlike New England in its desire to be a refuge for the persecuted of every sect.

For this reason Pennsylvania had not only many different creeds instead of one, but it had also many races and languages. But for all that, the Pennsylvanians scarcely differed more among themselves than the colonies all differed from each other in personal and social peculiarities. Not only were they far apart, little centers of life amid the unhewn forest, but they were unsympathetic and even unfriendly. Each was a jealous little nation to itself, working out its own destiny in its own way. It is for this reason that what proved to be the chief contribution of the Colonial period to the American literature that was to come was also its chief contribution to the greater nation that was to be made when they all threw in their lot together to work out a destiny in common. It consisted in establishing colleges and newspapers.

Before the end of the first half of the Colonial period there were seven colleges, which continue to this day. Each college was the point of destination and meeting place of the young men in its own colony and at each were gathered some students who had come from other colonies. So people living far distant from each other began to hear about each other's ex-

Continued on Page Thirty-one.